

“Seek the LORD”

This is the Third Sunday of the Church Liturgical Season of Lent. The purpose of Lent, in large part, is to prepare us for our Easter Celebration. So, you may wonder why the Scripture for today’s message is based on the Lectionary Reading from the Old Testament Book of the Prophet, Isaiah. Well, there are several reasons, which led me to use the Lectionary Old Testament Reading. First, our Bulletin covers include a New Revised Standard Version quote from our Scripture in **verse 6, “Seek the LORD while he may be found”**.

Second, Jesus clearly followed the Prophetic Tradition, especially as revealed in Isaiah, instead of the legalistic approach followed and pushed by the religious elite during Jesus’ public ministry. So, examining this Scripture will help us better understand Jesus’ world view and purpose. Unfortunately, the authors of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to have incorrectly believed Jesus was a Legalist, who was more faithful to God’s Law and Commands than were the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. That misunderstanding of Jesus’ relationship with the Law and the Prophets led to the popular belief Jesus came to enforce a more correct and strict adherence toward God’s Law. Today’s Old Testament Lectionary Reading will, hopefully, enable us to recognize Jesus was, instead of being a Legalist, very much part of the Prophetic Tradition of the Jews. Jesus’ fulfillment of the Prophetic Approach, over and against the legalistic requirements demanded by the Pharisees, Teachers of the Law, and the Priests, was a major source of the conflict between Jesus and the Legalists. **That being the case, the Good News of Jesus Christ is much more radical and liberating, than it is popularly understood by society!**

To better understand the clash between the Prophetic and Legalistic approaches of Judaism, we need to briefly review some history. In 587 B.C. the Babylonians conquered the remaining kingdom of the Hebrews called Judea. Jerusalem and its walls were decimated and the Temple was leveled. The skilled workmen, artists, scholars, and many others were carried back to the capital of Babylon to serve their conquerors in Exile. They were called Jews because they had come from Judea. This was the most traumatic experience the descendants of Abraham had ever experienced. They had 50 years of Exile during which they sought to understand how God had come to allow such a humiliating defeat. The Legalists concluded God had punished the people and nation because they had so forsaken God’s Law. The Prophetic Tradition explained the Exile came as the result of a Broken Relationship between the people and God, just as a marriage is frequently destroyed when one of the spouses is unfaithful to the other. **The Prophets called the people to return to a faithful relationship with God, while the Legalists demanded the technical adherence of every Commandment and Law of God.** The Jews were liberated from their Exile in 537 B.C. after Cyrus defeated the Babylonians. They returned home to rebuild their nation, Jerusalem, its walls, and the Temple. The Legalistic Approach dominated the next 575 years but the Prophetic message of God’s promises to reunite with the people through the Messiah continued to be yearned for.

Today’s Scripture from Isaiah was a prophetic message from God, which was shared and cherished during the Babylonian Exile. It reveals God’s Gracious Invitation for all people to come into a special Relationship with God and one another. **Verses 1 and 2 are amazing and shocking,**

“The LORD says,

‘Come, everyone who is thirsty — here is water!

Come, you that have no money — buy grain and eat!

Come! Buy wine and milk — it will cost you nothing!

Why spend money on what does not satisfy?

Why spend your wages and still be hungry?

Listen to Me and do what I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all.”

Only one’s parent or loved one would be so willing to sacrifice! Those words are a wonderful expression of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us, the Children of God! Indeed, only God’s Son could come near to manifesting such an expression of our Divine Parent’s Selfless Suffering Love for us, and so, Jesus Christ was not only sent into the world but gave his life on the cross. The Sacrament Jesus calls us to celebrate, so we remember why he died for us – why we have the best food, is Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper.

Because Jesus revealed such love from God, even toward the outcasts of society, the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law were shocked and saw his eating with and welcoming such “sinners” to be a great affront – a scandal. Clearly, they and their whole reality felt threatened. Their role as enforcers of the Law would no longer be needed! **They felt compelled to terminate the threat by getting rid of – orchestrating the death of – the one who manifested this message of God’s Unconditional Love – Jesus.** Yet, ironically, in so doing, they moved forward the full revelation of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for all people in the death of God’s Son!

Consider how Jesus' teachings and message – his gospel, especially as reported in the Gospel of John, sounds very much like what God said through the prophet in **verse 3**,
*“Listen now, My people, and come to Me;
come to Me, and you will have life!
I will make a lasting covenant with you
and give you the blessings I promised to David.”*

Indeed, from the time of the Early Church and up into the present, the Body of Christ has recognized we have the New and Eternal Covenant Relationship with God through Jesus Christ!

The universal nature of God's Purpose of creating a New Relationship with all people our Divine Parent was promised in **verse 5**,
*“Now you will summon foreign nations;
at one time they did not know you,
but now they will come running to join you!
I, the Lord your God, the holy God of Israel,
will make all this happen ...”*

Among those, who will welcome and accept God's Gracious Invitation, will be persons from every nation, race, sex, heritage, and ethnic group! We know from the reports in the New Testament Gospels that Jesus went so far as to welcome and invite persons, who were the rejected and outcasts of Jewish society – the very ill, the Samaritans, the tax collectors, and the “sinners”.

God invites us to come into the New Relationship with our Divine Parent as reported in our Reading from Isaiah. But, the Divine Message does not end there. We are informed of some important steps we are called to make as we receive God's invitation. The Prophet spoke in **verses 6 through 7**,

*“Turn to the Lord and pray to Him,
now that He is near.*

*Let the wicked leave their way of life
and change their way of thinking.*

*Let them turn to the Lord, our God;
He is merciful and quick to forgive.”*

Instead of the word “turn,” the New Revised Standard Version uses the term “Seek” as shown on our Bulletin Cover. Seeking or turning to and praying to God is very helpful as God's Invitation welcomes us into the New Covenant Relationship. Turning from anti-loving ways – the life of wickedness and changing our way of thinking to God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love are part of being in the New Relationship we have with God. And, yes, God mercifully and quickly forgives us. Indeed, Jesus died on the cross to demonstrate God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love includes mercy and undeserved forgiveness!

The Prophet delves deeper into the difference between our ways in the world and God's ways by reporting in **verses 8 and 9**,

*“My thoughts,’ says the LORD, ‘are not like yours,
and My ways are different from yours.*

*As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are My ways and thoughts above yours.’”*

Kathryn Matthews summed up this Scripture from Isaiah 55, writing, “This week's reading, or better, this poem from the prophet-poet Isaiah offers us, in nine short verses, the heart of the biblical message: God loves us, no matter what, and reaches out to us even (or especially) in the worst of times, making promises that are not just pie-in-the-sky, not just theoretical. God promises the things that we most yearn for, deep down in our hearts, the very basics of life: homecoming when we're lost or far away, a rich feast when we're hungry, flowing fresh water to satisfy our thirst, and a community of hope when we long for meaning in our lives – something greater than ourselves, in which and through which we might be a blessing to the whole world.”

Matthews continues, **“Oh, and another thing: there will be no cost affixed to this wonderful feast, no price of admission, and everyone (even people you would never expect) will be invited to the party.”** Matthews concludes, “Underneath and through this message runs a deep and tender compassion for the human predicament, our habit of getting entangled, trapped, in ways and habits that cut us off from the source of what we need most, or worse, being taken captive against our will by forces beyond our control, especially, in this case, the materialism that afflicts and mars our culture.” (“Open Invitation” by Kathryn Matthews (Huey) on Weekly Seeds)

God's promises revealed in our Scripture Reading have begun to be fulfilled through the Public Ministry, Death, and Resurrection of God's Son, Jesus the Christ! You and I are invited by the Divine Parent to be part of this Special Relationship. **We need to welcome this invitation and Seek – Turn – Allow God's Ways and Thoughts to become our thoughts and ways! Further, let's be God's Messengers, who share God's Invitation with everyone!** Amen.